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ABSTRACT

Educational policy does not always translate into programs that are consistent with the policymakers' original intentions. This paper presents findings of a case study that followed the course of a policy developed at the state level to teacher practice at the classroom level. Set in a western state, the study collected data through document review and interviews with 30 individuals associated with state policymaking, the state Department of Education, local school districts, and individual schools. Participants tended to view their subsystems as complete and not within the context of the entire system, which contributed to a decrease in community involvement. The study generated the following hypotheses: (1) Significant change in a system will occur only when the policy windows are open; (2) intentions evolve as a policy moves through the continuum; and (3) individuals who had higher-than-average levels of participation in program implementation demonstrated a higher degree of policy ownership and fidelity to policymakers' intentions than did individuals who were less involved. One figure and one table are included. (Contains 13 references.) (LMI)

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Evolution of Intentions From State Policy Development to Classroom Implementation: Systems, Subsystems, and Interdependence

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From State Policy Development to Classroom Implementation: Systems, Subsystems, and Interdependence

James R. Lowham

INTRODUCTION

Many individuals hold the assumption that well formulated policy changes will be implemented as designed and intended. By the mid-1980's the assumption was known to be false and researchers began to focus on questions involving whether the programs actually implemented could have the intention, quality, force, and results that underlie the policy (Odden, 1991). A problem has surfaced in in that the researchers have looked at the beginning of the policy development or at the implementation to determine whether the implemented programs met the intentions or gained the desired results. Without examining the continuum from policy development to implementation it is difficult to determine the degree of fidelity with the policymakers original intentions

This paper is about a study that looked at a continuum from policy development into practice. The objective of this paper is to report the findings, conclusions, and implications resulting from a case study of a policy as the policy was wending its way through the public education system of a state.

The findings emerged through the analysis of an educational initiative as it moved across a policy-into-practice continuum from the policymakers at the state level to the classroom teachers implementation level. Participants in the study had different vantage points, different perspectives, different problems, but they used the same language.

This study followed the evolution of intentions associated with school improvement and accountability in one sparsely populated state of the western United States. The intentions were traced from the policy development at the state level to teacher practices in the classrooms. The study included an analysis of the development of a policy, the passage of the policy through the system from the state level to the school districts passed through to schools, and, finally, implementation at the teacher level.

It may seem obvious that such a continuum would be well researched, described, and known. The obvious are not always the reality. Hall (1992), Hall and Hord (1987), McDonnell (1991), and McLaughlin (1987) have called for studies of the continuum from policy development to practice. However, very few published studies have reported such policy development and implementation investigations. There is an extensive research domain focused upon policy development and another extensive research domain focused upon the many aspects of implementation, but there are few published studies that bridge these two data bases. This case study was specifically designed to investigate evolution of

intentions across the continuum from policy development into practice and to link the research knowledge bases of policy development and implementation. Figure 1 is a map of the Policy-into-Practice Continuum that was used to frame this study.

The Policy-into-Practice Continuum

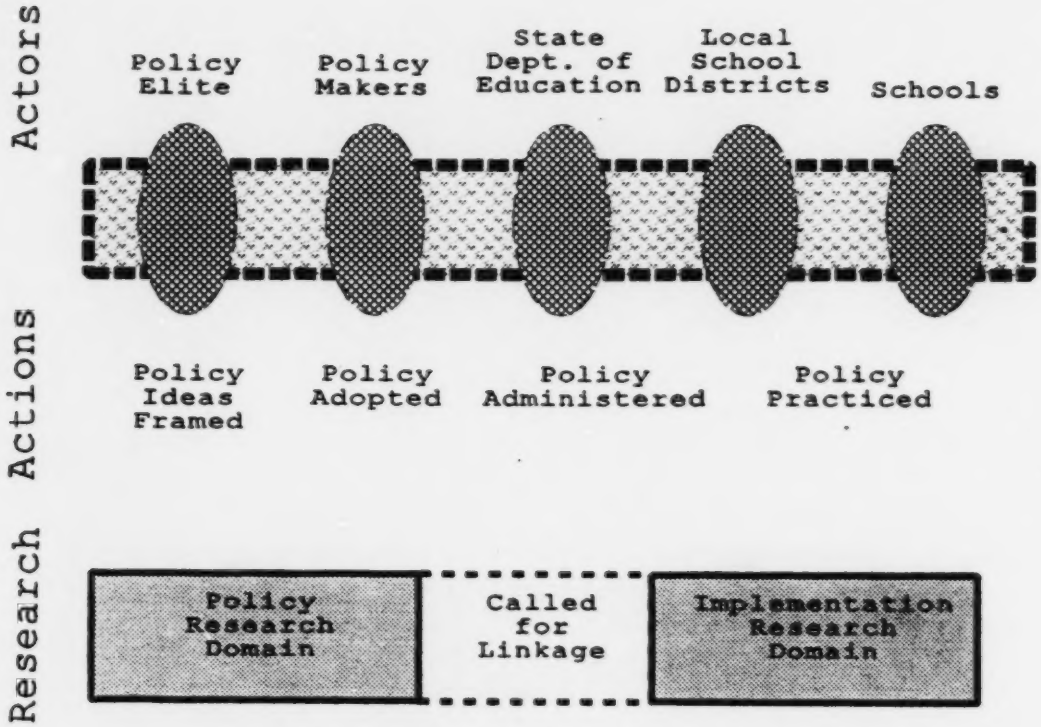

Figure 1

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The article begins with a review of three concepts that were key to framing the study and interpreting the data and selected related literature. This review is followed by a brief description of the study and the methods used for the study. The article concludes with description of an emerging concept, two emerging hypotheses, and a brief discussion.

THE RELATED LITERATURE

This section contains a brief review of pertinent literature from policy development and related literature about implementation. Following this review, three concepts that were particularly relevant to the study are presented, those being: methods of defining the intentions, adaptation, and the concept of a policy window.

Implementation Research

Pressman and Wildavsky published one of the first studies strictly related to implementation in 1973. They used case study methodology to show the effects of politics upon implementation. Since the original edition was published, many researchers have continued the evolutionary process of developing the domain and increasing the understanding of the process of implementation. Odden (1991) encapsulated these trends into three stages. Stage I is the research that took place from the mid-1960's until the mid-1970's. This stage can be summarized as containing research showing the conflict of policy implementation. Stage II began in the mid-70's when the research shifted toward whether the 15 years

of implementation research had yielded results by asking such questions as whether programs could be implemented in compliance with the original design and intent. Stage III began in the mid-1980's. This is when researchers began to focus on questions involving whether the programs actually implemented could have the intention, quality, force, and results that underlie the policy.

In the following paragraphs three concepts from the literature that had particular relevance to the study at hand are highlighted. The first concept is that there are several methods through which policy intentions may be defined. The second concept is that of policy and practice adaptation. The third concept is that of a policy window.

Policy intentions

What may at first glance seem to be quite well understood frequently becomes more complex upon closer examination. Sc it is with the concept of policy intentions. The intention of a policy seems to vary depending upon the perspective and orientation of the individual.

Hall and Hord (1987) identified five possible orientations for defining innovations and the advantages and disadvantages of each type (See Table 1). These five orientations are distinctly different and not just a restatement of the intentions. An individual of the bureaucracy states the intentions of a policy using one orientation the message may be received by an individual who is processing the intentions from a different orientation.

Table 1

Five Orientations for Stating Policy Intentions

Orientation	Advantages	Disadvantages
Perceived Attributes	Defined from the adopter's point of view and problems and issues that may develop are addressed from the adopter's perspective	Expressed in terms of perception, not reality
Underlying Philosophy	Encourages reflective thought about the needed change	Frequently difficult to translate from philosophy into action, generally lacking in detail
Goals or results	Intended results are communicated	Details and procedures to accomplish the results are left undefined or unknown
Implementation requirements	Needed resources are defined	What happens with the resources is left undefined
Operational	Provides a concrete description of what was intended as well as what has to take place during use of the innovation	Very different approaches may yield the similar results while requiring very different resources

Note. Adapted from Change in Schools: Facilitating the Process by G. Hall and S. Hord, 1987, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Adaptation

Hall and Hord (1987) defined fidelity to be the degree of adherence between the operational configurations and the ideal model as conceived by the developer or others. If the expectation for the degree of fidelity is high, there is likely to be only one acceptable configuration of the innovation. If the expectation for degree of fidelity is low, many different configurations of the innovation may be observed.

A brief review of two concepts of adaptation is contained in the following paragraphs. With both concepts there is adaptation, but in one of the concepts the innovation undergoes the adaptation while in the other concept both the innovation and the organization undergo adaptation. The first adaptation concept to be reviewed is re-invention (Rogers, 1983) which deals with adaptation of the innovation to fit the organization. The second is mutual adaptation (Berman and McLaughlin, 1978) which deals with how the organization changes the innovation while the innovation is changing the organization.

Re-invention

Rogers (1983) defined re-invention to be "the degree to which an innovation is changed or modified by a user during its adoption and implementation" (p. 16). He found six conditions where re-invention occurs: the innovation is complex, the adapter lacks detailed knowledge about the innovation, the innovation is a general concept, the innovation is adapted as a solution to a wide

range of problems, and the change agent encourages the organization to modify or adopt the innovation.

A consequence of re-invention is that when it occurs the probability is high that the agency has adapted the innovation to fit more closely the existing practices (Rogers, 1983). Rogers concluded that because of this phenomenon, there will be little change in practice when re-invention occurs.

Mutual Adaptation

Berman and McLaughlin (1978) defined mutual adaptation as the "process by which the project is adapted to the reality of its institutional setting, while at the same time teachers and school officials adapt their practices in response to the project" (p. viii). It is important to note that with this concept there is an expectation that there will be modification to both the organization as well as the policy and practice.

Throughout the 1970s the practice of adaptation was considered essential for successful implementation. Datta (1980) was the first to openly question the necessity of mutual adaptation. She noted the common theme of local problem solving among the projects that were analyzed in the process of conceptualizing mutual adaptation. These projects stressed the importance of local problem solving. Therefore it was not surprising that the successfully implemented projects included local modifications. Datta (1980) did not dispute the fact that mutual adaptation took place, but it took place because it was called for in the policy,

not because it was inevitable. When the policy initiative calls for local adaptation and problem solving, there should be a high likelihood of there being local adaptation and local problem solving. If the project is deemed successful, it is highly probable that mutual adaptation can be found.

Policy Windows

Kingdon (1984) studied policymaking at the federal government level in the United States and found that there were certain times when policy changes could be made and other times when the change met so much resistance that the change in policy could not be made. Kingdon labeled the time when the policy could be changed as the policy window. The following paragraphs briefly summarize Kingdon's findings.

Using a fluid metaphor, Kingdon (1984) identified three sets of thoughts or actions flowing through the bureaucracy at the federal level. He identified these as the alternative stream, the problem stream, and the political stream. Kingdon's research found that a policy window existed in those moments when the three streams were linked.

Alternative Stream

Kingdon found that within the universe of possible actions available to an organization there is a subset of these actions that meet certain criteria (1984). He labeled this subset the alternatives stream. Before an innovation could be considered part of the alternative stream Kingdon found that the following

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tests needed to be met: technical feasibility, value acceptability, tolerable cost, reasonable chance for acceptance by the elected official and the public. Kingdon found that if an innovation did not meet these criteria, it had to be reworked or combined with other innovations before it could be considered viable. However, it is important to note that the alternatives did not have to have the capability to solve a problem.

Problem Stream

Kingdon (1984) defined the term problem stream to be the set of conditions that are being experienced, the perception of those conditions, and beliefs that something should be done to change the set of conditions. It is critical that there is a belief that it is necessary that something should be done about the condition. What should be done may vary widely and how it should be done may not be known, but the belief that something should be done must be present.

Political Stream

Kingdon (1984) identified a third stream, the political stream. This stream was "composed of such things as public mood, pressure group campaigns, election results, partisan or ideological distributions in Congress, and changes of administration" (p. 152). He labeled the stream the political stream because he was referring to the factors of "electoral, partisan, or pressure groups" (p. 152).

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A critical component of the political stream is the national mood (Kingdon, 1984). Kingdon found that the idea has many names but that the policymakers discuss it and believe that they know when it shifts. He found that the perceived shifts in the mood of the public served to promote some items and restrain others.

Organized political forces also influenced the political stream. These forces are found in interest groups, political groups, and political elites (Kingdon, 1984). These forces can, at one extreme, advocate for a policy change or, at the other extreme, make the path to serious consideration so costly that the policy is never brought forth for serious discussion. Kingdon found that much of the time the "balance of organized forces mitigates against any change at all" (p. 158).

Policy Window

Kingdon (1984) discovered that policy changes occur when the problem, alternative, and politics streams merge then policy change takes place. He labeled the time when the three streams were merged as the policy window.

THE STUDY

The action studied was focused upon the development and the implementation of a policy to address the concerns for school improvement and accountability that surfaced in a state in the western United States during the late 1980s. Concerns of the policymakers did not occur overnight, but once the concerns became a focus of the attention of the policymakers more policymakers at

the state level became involved and the numbers of policymakers interested in taking action increased. The purpose of the study was to determine the degree of fidelity existed between the intentions of the policymakers when the policy was being framed to the intentions of the teachers when the policy was being implemented. The policy framework was being constructed approximately five years prior to the gathering of data for this study. In the middle of this five-year span the policy was written and officially adopted.

The Method

One state in the United States was selected for the study. The participants in the study included members of the policymaking elite, policymakers, employees of the administrative group charged with school accreditation, local school district personnel, principals, and teachers. More than thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted along with reviewing current and historical documentation at state and local agencies during a period of seven months that began approximately two years after the policy was officially adopted by the state. The verbatim interviews and information gathered from the documents were analyzed using the techniques of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The organizations and the individuals that developed the solutions and implemented the policy were divided into four levels: the policymakers, the State Department of Education, local school

districts, and individual schools. Participants within each level were selected by positional, relational, and reputational analyses. Participants initially selected were asked to nominate other participants. Both the local school districts and the schools within those districts were selected through a modified Delphi technique (Whitman, 1990).

Data collection for the study began with the SDE personnel identified through positional analysis. This was approximately two years after the policy was officially adopted. All but one of these individuals had worked for the department for more than 15 years and, for at least part of this time, each had been assigned a position in the school improvement unit. They had some definite beliefs about whom was critical in the school improvement and school accountability process. The SDE participants nominated these policymakers to be interviewed for the study.

Two local school districts participated in the study. These districts were identified by the SDE participants using the modified Delphi technique (Whitman, 1990). One school district was identified by the SDE participants as representative of those districts that had done more than what might have been expected toward implementation. The second district was identified by the SDE participants as representing those districts that had done a typical amount toward implementation. In each of the two districts the superintendent and one other district level individual, who was identified by the superintendent as responsible for the

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implementation of the policy in the district, participated in the study.

Within each participating district, the two district level participants, the superintendent and one assistant, identified two of the district's schools for participation using a modified Delphi technique (Whitman, 1990). The schools were to fit similar descriptions as the two districts had met, one school that had done more and one that had made an average amount of progress toward implementation of the state policy.

Within each school the principal and two teachers participated in the study. The principal nominated the two teachers in the school to participate, one teacher who had done more and one who had done about a typical amount toward implementation.

Other individuals were identified for participation in the study through nomination by those already selected as study participants or positional analysis. For example, the governor of the state and two legislators were interviewed at length about their perspectives and roles in the development of the policy and one other legislator and one other superintendent were interviewed to confirm information gained from other interviews.

This spectrum of participants gave a more complete perspective of the development of the policy and the changes in practice than would have been possible if a narrower portion or just one end of the continuum would have been studied. Because of the spectrum of participants, the evolution of the intentions of

the policy could be observed and factors that affected the evolution could be identified. The spectrum also afforded the opportunity for the researcher to place the policy and its implementation in a more complete context. Also the use of the continuum avoided the problems inherent in studying policy development only without looking at the implementation of the policy or studying the implementation of the policy without looking at its development.

EMBRYONIC HYPOTHESES AND EMERGING FINDINGS

Only when the data from multiple levels were analyzed did common threads begin to surface into patterns. The following embryonic hypotheses and concepts emerged from the data analysis and review of the related literature.

Emerging Concepts

One overriding concept emerged during the study. The complete educational continuum for a given change is only a subsystem of the context in which it exists. While this may seem obvious to a reader, it was amazing to see the effects on the participants of not understanding this while being in the "fog of battle" of working and implementing changes.

It was with great regularity that study participants viewed the level of the organization in which he or she had power and operated as a complete system. Furthermore it was their system. For example, teachers referred to their classroom as a system and it belonged to them and state level participants referred to the

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district as a system and it was theirs. Additionally, levels of the organization at the same level or above were viewed, at best, as another system or, at worst, they were seen as hindrances. Failure to see their organizational unit as one subsystem in the state system was true for most participants at all levels.

The viewing of an organizational unit as "my system" and "the system" accounts for much of the difficulty in making changes in organizations larger than a few subsystems. This finding advances the concept of mutual adaptation where both the organization and the innovation are modified. The greater the melding of the perceptions of system ownership with perceived intentions the greater the commitment to the implementation of the innovation. While the commitment to the innovation in this case is high, the commitment is to the intentions of the innovation as defined by the individual is even higher.

An example of this is the degree of community involvement at both the school and the district in the setting of performance standards for the students. The policymakers intended that there should be a high degree of community involvement in the setting of performance standards. They believed that this would greatly increase the accountability. One policymaker stated:

> Accountability to its local community was an intention . . . to whom are they accountable? They [schools] are accountable to the community, their community ought to be involved and know what's going on.

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By the time the policy was being implemented at the district level the amount of community involvement had greatly diminished. In the district that was identified as doing more than average a group of community members met with district leaders prior to the time the policy had been officially adopted to discuss outcomes. During the interviews there were some discussions about reforming a similar group, but only after the teachers and administrators had formulated the standards. One teacher stated:

> We want, eventually, to get some parents in there [involved], but we weren't ready to until we got all our culture written and our vision written . . . We decided we weren't ready yet.

Involving the community was viewed as important and desirable in the future, but in the present and the past the involvement had been "They come in and look at it and okay what we've done."

Individuals in the other participating district believed that the members of the board represented the community. The superintendent stated:

> We looked upon our board members as the parent representatives . . . When I say board members were involved as parent representatives, they were involved in seeing the [final] product put together with an opportunity to discuss it . . .

However, one of the participating principals was facilitating the participation in luncheon meetings of civic organizations so that the teachers might hear some of the concerns of the community members. One of the teachers from the district who participated in the study never mentioned parental involvement, in fact he stated:

> [It's] very similar to what it was when I first began teaching . . . I see it being very, very similar to that, just simply different terms.

In this district, as in the other district, the involvement of the community was not rejected, but in this district the involvement in a school accreditation process for the present and the foreseeable future was limited to the elected board of trustees.

However, in the elementary schools that participated in the study there was a much higher parent involvement in schools. The parents were involved to a much higher degree than had been in the past. The involvement came in the form of volunteering labor and time to help in the lunchroom, library, cafeteria, and copy center. At about the same time that the school accreditation policy was officially adopted with its call for parental involvement there was a reduction in the budgets for the schools. These two events blended together, one encouraging parental involvement and the other being a need for voluntary help. Hence schools could easily and very honestly say that parents were becoming involved with schools to a much higher degree.

The concept of the level of an organization in which one participates being a complete system accounts for much of the evolution of intentions as the policy moves among the subsystems. When the concept is applied throughout a system, the mutual adaptation of intentions and innovations occurs at each level as the policy or innovation wends it way through the hierarchy.

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Hence, the intentions of the implemented practice may be only distantly related to the original intentions of the policy elite.

Emerging Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1. Significant change in a system will take place only when the policy windows are open. Kingdon (1984)hypothesized that policy change takes place at the federal level when the policy window is open. This effect hypothesized by Kingdon at the federal level was found at each level of the Policy-into-Practice Continuum in the present study.

Hypothesis 2. Intentions evolve as a policy moves through the continuum is the second emerging hypothesis. Further, the evolution of intentions of a policy is greater when the intentions are defined philosophically, by perceived attributes, or by goals than when they are defined by implementation requirements or operationally. The evolution is greater also when the intentions must be communicated between networks in the Policy-into-Practice Continuum. This problem is magnified when there are few and relatively weak links between the subsystems in the system.

When an intention is defined philosophically, it can be modified in each subsystem to attack a problem that has been recognized by the individuals in that subsystem. When an intention is defined philosophically, the implementors must develop an operational definition before implementation. This requires development of an operational definition of the intentions and results in the development or selection of an innovation, the

adaption of an innovation, or the adoption of an innovation. At each level this translation from a philosophical definition to operational definition increases evolution of the intention.

Hypothesis 3. Individuals who were identified as having done more than average toward implementation demonstrated a higher degree of ownership of the policy and fidelity with the intentions of the policymakers than those who were identified as doing about an average amount of implementation. This was particularly true in the district that was nominated as having done about an average degree of implementation. When the ownership was high, the mutual adaptation was high. Both intentions of the policy and the organization were modified. In the individual cases where there was lower ownership there was more adaptation of the intervention. In these cases the policy was changed to meet the present practices of the organization with little change in the organization.

While Datta (1980) determined that mutual adaptation was not necessary for the implementation process to be successful, the policymakers had framed the policy so that mutual adaptation would happen. It was interesting to note that in the policy studied here where mutual adaptation was directed, this original intention was displaced by re-invention (Rogers, 1983) where ownership in the implementation was not high.

In summary, the concept of a system in policy development and innovation implementation and the concept of a policy window emerged from this study. Neither concept is newly discovered. The

lack of application of systems thinking and planning was found to be a major factor that minimized the probability of change within each subsystem. The concept of a policy window and the associated streams of political, problem, and alternative were found at the federal level, but previous studies have not described their presence or role throughout the Policy-into-Practice Continuum.

The concept and the hypotheses described in this section are very embryonic and the need for further research is great. As such, they present an opportunity to investigate change and change efforts in organizations and their greatest potential will be achieved when the research studies the system and not a narrow focus on one or another subsystem.

CONCLUSION

The policy window concept provides a framework for the evaluation of a system in which policy development and implementation takes place. The concept also allows for an evaluation of the fidelity between the intentions of the policymakers and the achieved practice. However, the present state of knowledge about the timing of the window opening makes the prediction of policy changes extremely limited. Policy windows open infrequently and do not remain open very long (Kingdon, 1984), but when they are open several changes related to the confluence of the three streams may be passed through the window. Those who wish to change or develop must be ready to take advantage of a policy window when it opens.

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When viewed through a macro lens the levels of the state system were remarkably similar. Each subsystem had its own problem stream, alternative stream, and political stream. The members of each subsystem were concerned with aspects of policy formulation and implementation concerned with school improvement, with helping children, with working toward a good life for the children.

Participants used similar terms when discussing these similar aspects of the problem, alternative, and political streams, but when the data were viewed with a cross continuum view the levels were different. The differences were based upon the perspective of the individuals. The state level policymakers were concerned about thousands of children and hundreds of schools. At the classroom level the concern was about the children of the class and to a certain extent the children of the school. However, both groups had concerns about policy development and policy implementation, but their problems, politics, and alternatives were different.

Those who wish to change policies or practices are well served by the framework of Kingdon's policy window (1984). However, because of the unpredictability of the timing of the opening of the policy window such individuals or groups would be advised to have the policy suggestions ready because time may not be available to formulate the policy from some loosely thoughts prior to the window closing. Those wishing to implement change in a system must also realize that there will be a policy window at each subsystem and

transmittal of the policy intentions entails their fitting into an open policy window within each subsystem.

Because of the similarities among the various levels of the system that were found in this study there may not be such a wide gap in the knowledge bases as depicted in Figure 1. The gap that exists is a gap in awareness of the knowledge bases as constructed from the perspectives of the individuals in subsystems along the continuum. The researchers and the workers frequently focus exclusively upon the subsystem in which they operate. Accentuating this lack of awareness of the knowledge bases of other subsystems is the prevalent perception that the other levels of the system are hindrances to operations and change.

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